

PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2018

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform PRESIDENT'S ANNUAL REPORT 2018

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Bill Bush

Note: this is a supplemented and amended version of the draft circulated at the Annual General Meeting on 22 November 2018.

2018 has seen an unprecedented amount of action in support of drug law reform. Most notably this has involved Uniting's fair treatment campaign launched in Sydney town Hall by Sir Richard Branson and a new report of Australia 21 on the social harms of drug policy – but these are just the beginning. I hope you will see that your committee has been rather busy.

Committee for 2018 – ELECTED AT AGM ON 23 Nov 2017

It was a measure that Families and Friends is back in business that at the Annual General Meeting at Mary's and my place on 23 November a full complement of officeholders and committee members were elected. I was elected President, John Ley Vice-President, Marion McConnell Secretary and Pat Varga, Joan Westaway, and Paul Wilkinson allowed themselves to be drafted as ordinary committee members. Without solid organisational support from those who volunteer to serve on the committee, the work of the association for better drug laws and policies cannot be achieved.

Pat Varga bravely continued to allow herself to be drafted to serve as Treasurer on the basis that she would be replaced. Thus, the committee, in accordance with its authority under the Rules of the Association to fill vacancies, at a meeting on 22 February 2018 appointed Brock Bryce to replace Pat.

This appointment since the last annual general meeting was made by the committee in accordance with its authority to fill casual vacancies. It is now the opportunity for the Association as a whole at the present AGM to express its views on these organisational matters.

Office and website assistance

Genevieve Hudson assisted Marion on a regular weekly basis. She was responsible for much of the improvement during the year of website presence and the linkage to it of FFDLR's Twitter account. Her services were secured through Volunteering and Contact ACT and made possible by the insurance coverage that Families and Friends now pays.

FFDLR meetings

We revived the former usual format of meetings open to the entire membership held at St Ninian's Uniting Church in Lyneham to which we generally invited guest

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speakers. These talks were open to the public. The “general meetings” took place on:

22 February – guest speaker Dr Paul Kelly AO;

26 April – guest speaker Jill Hughes, operational director of AOD services for ACT Health.

28 June – guest speaker Bernadette Bryant and her daughter, Laura, on the challenges of securing medical cannabis.

23 August – guest speakers Anna McKenry, Programs Clinical Services Director, Karralika and Kerry Fitzroy, Community Services Program Manager, Karralika.

John Ley kindly continued to offer his place as a venue for committee meetings. A meeting was held there on 14 November, 2018

Relations with ACT Health

The ACT Department of Health is the ACT agency with principal carriage of drug policy. It has long convened the drug policy implementation task force established in a large measure thanks to the effort of Brian McConnell and on which Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform has had a seat. Believing, as we do, that drug use should be considered as a health and a social issue rather than one of criminal justice, the governance arrangements within the ACT government are very important. They were focused particularly on the need for a drug strategy to replace the one that expired in 2014 and on understanding and developing relations with the Department which in 2016 underwent massive structural reform and personnel changes. The new year kicked off for us the day after the AGM with a drug services forum at ANU Commons in Rimmer Street on Friday, 24 November 2017. Key new personnel with responsibility for drug policy spoke at that meeting. They included Dr Paul Kelly, Chief Health Officer and Deputy Director General of ACT Health and Emily Harper, Executive Director of the Health Improvements Branch.

In pursuing this work, we have kept in close touch with the Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drugs Association ACT (ATODA). Altogether, working with ACT health occupied a lot of our attention during the year:

On 22 February 2018 Marion and I attended a meeting convened by ATODA to discuss a new draft of an ACT drug strategy action plan;

On the evening of 22 February, Dr Paul Kelly AO spoke at our first Families and Friends meeting for the year

On 1 March Marion and I attended a meeting of the drug treatment workers group that took place at Catholic Health Care and

On 26 March Marion and I attended a larger meeting of stakeholders organised by ATODA.

29 March - Submission of our comments on the ACT draft strategy action plan.

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- 20 June - Bill attended meeting to consider draft ACT drug strategy action plan of key alcohol and other drug stakeholders at ACT health offices, Philip
- 3 August – Comments submitted by Marion on the draft of the ACT drug strategy action plan 2018 – 2021 released for public comment in July 2018;
- 20 June –Attendance of Bill at Alcohol and Drug Stakeholders Action Meeting at ACT Health at Bowes St Woden
- 2 October – Attendance of Bill at a further meeting of the Stakeholders Action Meeting at ACT Health in Holder
- 4 October – Attendance of Bill at a follow up meeting of the Stakeholders Action Meeting at ACT Health in Holder

ADVOCACY

Meetings with politicians and significant people

- 9 March - Meeting over coffee of Marion and Bill with Lisa Gelbart, policy adviser with responsibility for drug policy and mental health in Shane Rattenbury's office
- 29 March – Chance meeting with Veronica Wensing, Senior Advisor, Justice and Corrections to Shane Rattenbury and follow up correspondence in May and July
- 23 May - Meeting on medicinal cannabis in Shane Rattenbury's office with community members and others including Dr Jeff Hergenrather, a clinician from California and Dr David Caldicott
- 24 May - Meeting with Elizabeth Lee, member for Molongo and shadow Education Minister in the ACT Legislative Assembly
- 25 May – Marion and Genevieve Hudson attended, at the invitation of Andrew Leigh MP, a barbecue to celebrate volunteer week.

Submissions to and appearances before Parliamentary and other official inquiries

Victorian Inquiry into drug law reform:

The Victorian Parliament's Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee tabled its long awaited report on 27 March. Marion at a Sydney hearing and Bill, Brenda Irwin and Jo Wade at a hearing in Melbourne had given evidence in 2017.

Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee enquiry into the Criminal Code and other Legislation Amendment (Removing Commonwealth Restrictions on Cannabis) Bill 2018.

The committee considered a private member's bill put forward by Sen David Leyonhjelm

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18 June - Sent 18 page submission

17 August - Appearance of Joan Westaway and Bill in Parliament House at a hearing of the committee

20 August –Written comments to queries that arose in the course of the hearing on 17 August

Bill to legalise cannabis in the ACT

On 22 November, the very day of our annual general meeting, we made a 15 page submission supporting the exposure draft of a private members bill put forward by Michael Pettersson, an ALP backbencher.

Forums and Symposiums

Drug services forum focussed on the proposed adult Drug and Alcohol Court held on 1 May at the Legislative Assembly reception room. Meegan Fitzharris the Minister for Health and Well-being and Gordon Ramsay, the Attorney-General both spoke;

Justice Connections at the University of Canberra on 1 June. Bill attended this symposium at which The Hon. Michael Kirby and the ACT Justice Minister, Shane Rattenbury, spoke.

Suicide prevention - lunchtime forum 28 August with Matt Blundell, community Ambassador of RUOK at the Hughes community centre. The event was organised by the Canberra Mental Health Forum.

A drug policy conversation with Johann Hari on 19 September in the Playhouse Theatre. This was part of ATODA's Canberra Drug Policy Series. Marion and other members of FFDLR attended.

Scriptwise International Overdose awareness Day Morning Tea in Parliament House on 23 August at which Ann Finlay spoke. Bill attended.

Lunch and forum in the ACT Assembly reception room on 15 October with Dr Khalid Tinasti, Executive Secretary of the Global Commission on Drug Policy. This was part of ATODA's Canberra Drug Policy Series. Bill, Marion and others attended.

A Conversation of Carrie Fowlie and Prof Caitlin Hughes with Dr Nuno Capaz on *What happened when Portugal decriminalised all drugs*. This event took place on 16 November in the Shine Dome of the Australian Academy of Science and was followed by a reception at University House. Bill, Marion and Paul Wilkinson attended.

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Launches

16 April - Marion and Bill attended the launch by Meegan Fitzharris and Yvette Berry of three Australian first tools Promoting Safety and Prioritising Domestic and Family Violence in the ACT Alcohol and Other Drug Sector. These were produced during the first year of the ACT Alcohol and Other Drug safer families program.

12 Oct - Marion and Bill attended the launch on 12 October of Uniting's FairTreatment campaign in Sydney town Hall.

2 Nov - Bill and Marion attended the launch of the latest Australia21 Report held opposite the NSW Parliament House in Macquarie Street, Sydney in conjunction with the end of Uniting's Long Walk from Dubbo. The report is entitled *We all pay the price: our drug laws are tearing apart Australia's social fabric, as well as harming drug users and their families.*

Co-operation with other organisations

ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS)

ACT Hepatitis Resource Centre

Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA)

We greatly appreciate the work of Carrie Fowlie and her team at (ATODA), the ACT alcohol and other drug peak organisation. In particular, in cooperation with the ANU School of Sociology and Uniting, it initiated the very well attended Canberra Drug Policy Series of public events of which those on 19 September, 15 October and 16 November are mentioned elsewhere in this report.

Australia21

A highlight of the year was the initiative of Australia 21 to build on its already extensive engagement in reform of drug policies by convening a national round table to consider social harms caused by drug policy.

Bill and Marion attended that round table that, thanks to Fiona Patten MLC and leader of the Reason Party was held at Parliament House in Melbourne on 21 March.

The round table issued a joint statement calling on all Australian governments "to treat drug use primarily as a health and social issue and to remove criminal sanctions for personal use and possession."

The report of the round table. – *We all pay the price: our drug laws are tearing apart Australia's social fabric, as well as harming drug users and their families*

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- was launched on 2 November simultaneously in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. It draws attention to the social harms flowing from drug policy thereby opening up a novel approach to tackle the wicked problem of drug policy. It explores the complex two - way interactions between the punitive approach to drug use and problems including poverty, social disadvantage, unemployment, homelessness, family violence, child protection interventions, mental illness, stigma, discrimination and suicide. It calls for the removal of criminal sanctions for consumption and a boost in funding for treatment, to reduce the health, social and economic costs of drug harms ultimately borne by all Australians. At the Canberra launch copies were presented to the Attorney General (Gordon Ramsay) and the Minister for Health and Well-Being (Meegan Fitzharris).t

Bill and Marion attended the launch in Sydney which took place opposite Parliament House in Macquarie Street in conjunction with the end of the Long March from Dubbo

Uniting Church of Australia NSW and ACT Synod, Uniting and the UCA ACT Presbytery Social Justice Group

On 5 June Marion and Bill attended a lunch with and evening talk by Dr Manual Cardoso at St Stephen's Uniting Church, 197 Macquarie Street in Sydney. Marion's intervention from the floor was a highlight of the evening;

Bill provided paragraphs on the link between drug policy and homelessness for a submission prepared by Canberra region Presbytery Social Justice Group of the Uniting Church

Attendance of Marion & Bill at the launch on Friday 12 October in the Sydney Town Hall of the Uniting/Uniting Church fair treatment campaign at which Marion was specially recognised.

On 2 November Bill and Marion attended the end of the Long Walk from Dubbo at St Stephen's Church in Macquarie St Sydney. Part of the FairTreatment Campaign, the march drew attention to the lack of treatment in regional centres. Marion spoke on the steps of St Stephen's.

Australia Institute.

Correspondence in July concerning the scope of a federal corruption watchdog

CatholicCare Canberra & Goulburn. Running a stall on 29 November 2017 at the 10th Annual Comorbidity Interagency Day at Blackfriars in Watson. Marion, Paul Wilkinson and Bill attended.

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Canberra Mental Health Forum.

Bill regularly attends the meetings of this feisty group that meets monthly under U3A auspices at the Cook Community Hub. Its chair, Ros Williams, attended our meeting on 22 February.

Restorative Community Network

Convened by Mary Ivec: Bill seeks to attend as many as possible of the monthly events of this group;

Civil Liberties Australia

Federal Association for Accepting Drug Treatment and a Humane Drug Policy (Germany).

We received a message from our German friends on the occasion of our remembrance ceremony but unfortunately neglected sending one to theirs.

Harm Reduction Australia

We cooperated with Harm Reduction Australia and others in calls for pill testing at music festivals in the ACT.

We signed an open letter by Shane Rattenbury to Cattle Yard Promotions asking them to support the pill testing trial at its Groovin' the Moo festival.

29 April – Pill testing carried out at Groovin' the Moo festival

Mental Health Community Coalition

Volunteering and Contact ACT

We are paid members of this organisation. There continues to be potential for further volunteers. Genevieve Hudson, a volunteer helps considerably with the website.

Speaking engagements

21st Feb. 2018 - Bill spoke at a meeting of the Jerrabomberra Probus Club.

11 September - Bill on Drug policy and mental health interactions to the Canberra Mental Health Forum

Significant Correspondence

Email of 5 November to Michael Kirby on the Williams Royal Commission and the National Crime Authority.

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Letter of 15 January written to Hon Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria regarding the medically supervised injecting room established in Richmond and his response.

Remembrance Ceremony – 29th October

This year's remembrance ceremony took place in the shadow of a rising trend of opiate overdose deaths. Earlier in October the ACT police had revealed that 13 people had died so far this year from a heroin overdose. Many more are now dying from a dependency developed to prescription opiates than to illicit ones. In the context of inadequate specialist pain treatment, people are becoming dependent on prescription opiates like oxycodone and fentanyl. The trajectory to dependency may thus have changed but the end result is similar to the heartbreaking situation of the late 1990s. Indeed the more governments attempt to restrict the prescription of opiates, the more likely those desperate for relief will turn to the criminal black market for it. With opiate overdose deaths running at three a day Australia is sadly following down the path of the United States where opiate overdose deaths have grown to become a national epidemic linked to social and economic exclusion and despair. Our speaker this year, Ann Finlay has been through this mill with her son developing a dependency after suffering severe burns. Like so many, he was young, talented, sensitive and troubled and turned away by the system. As our media release stated: "unless the government takes effective coordinated action a host of people not thought of as illicit drug users will be caught up in the same fatal web because they experience chronic pain or have a mental health problem."

In welcoming Gordon Ramsay, ACT Attorney General, I said: "We invite you here in your capacity as chief law officer. Our gathering mourns the consequences of the intrusion of the criminal law into an area in which it should have no place . . . Next time we invite you we sincerely hope it will be in honour of your transformative work" for the relief of social disadvantage in the community. The Rev Caitlin Kinsey Scott's reading of the 280 names was profoundly moving.

"How," she asked, "do we gather strength for the journey, when some of the ones we travelled with have fallen behind? It is in the returning again each year, or in one moment of the day, to say the names and to tell the stories. This is what the Gumatj people believe and what we also believe. These losses tie us to the past, they tie us to the future, and they tie us to each other. They tie us to the life of strangers. We tell our own stories only to find that it is exactly what a very lost someone needs to hear. It may be what a very lost society needs to hear."

MEDIA

As an advocacy group, Families and Friends strive to draw media attention to the injustice and inadequacies of existing drug policy and to the presence of voices of families calling for reform. It has become much more difficult for the Association to

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gain media attention. This was evident at the 2017 Remembrance Ceremony when our media release about the record number of overdose deaths in the ACT failed to be reported in *The Canberra Times* even though a reporter and a photographer from that paper were present at the ceremony. On the other hand, thanks to the highly skilled assistance provided by the Uniting FairTreatment campaign, this year the ceremony was well covered, with radio interviews of Marion and Bill, coverage by Channel 9 and *The Canberra Times*.

Media releases

26 October 2018 - Ceremony remembers a record number of overdose deaths. With the considerable assistance of Uniting, this media release attracted considerable attention.

18 November 2017 - Potential to save lives at dance festival stopped

Media interviews:

Interviews

4 January: Marion on WIN TV News

4 October: Marion on Drive 666 re Uniting Church and decriminalisation

29 October: Interview with Marion with 2CC re Remembrance Ceremony

29 October: Marion and Bill interview with local ABC re Remembrance Ceremony

29 October; Marion and Bill interview with Mix 106.3 re Remembrance Ceremony

14 November: Marion and Bill for Sydney Criminal Lawyers blog

Other Media

A 5 minute media video was produced by Uniting telling Marion's story.

A Podcast by Amanda Tattersall from ChangeMakers also mentioned Marion

A video of the 2018 Remembrance Ceremony is yet to be completed.

Letters to the Editor

Members had letters published in *The Canberra Times* on many different aspects of drug policy, namely:

Feb 4 - failure of war on drugs - Marion

Feb 6 - over-the-counter monitoring of prescription pharmaceuticals requires increased investment in specialist drug and alcohol treatment services - Bill

May 3 – Drug law reform means less use – Bill

May 3 – Drug law reform is not a black and white issue – Marion

Nov 15 – Drug policy in school violence – Bill

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Media articles

Articles published in July and August as part of the drug reform series in John Menadue's [Pearls and Irritations](#) website by:

- **Marion**, The long road to drug law reform;
- **Bill**, High drug incarceration – harms manifest and benefits hard to perceive on the association between drug and mental health policy in the high and growing incarceration rate ;and by
- **Ralph Seccombe**, Production of illicit drugs – the balloon effect.

Website and Social media

Marion has taken to social media like a blackbird to a bird bath. She has discovered a hitherto under recognised twittering talent. On the latest count she had sent 936 tweets, was following 120 and had 313 followers. We need to draw our attention to increasing our Facebook profile.

The Twitter handle is: @FFDLR. It is important that all our members use whatever social media channels they are comfortable with, to promote the cause of drug law reform.

Never forget that conversations with friends, neighbours, work colleagues and relations around the meal table or over a cup of coffee are just as important. The personal contact is very powerful getting the word out.

Newsletters

To tailor our cloth to our capacities, we have ceased to issue a newsletter every month. This year we have produced one every two months. Articles for the newsletter would be welcome as well as editing assistance. Since the previous general meeting 7 newsletters have been issued, namely in February, April, June, August, October and November 2018.

Bill Bush

13 December 2018